

ANDRÉ CHÉNIER.

IN 1840, an old gentleman resided in Paris, whom it was my habit to consult whenever I desired any information touching the men and events of the first French revolution. He was an ex-noble, who, like many of his class, had at the outset attached himself with perfect disinterestedness to the ideas of the eighteenth century. He had been one of the first subscribers to the *Encyclopédie*, whose ponderous and dusty volumes still haughtily displayed themselves on the shelves of his fine library. While very young he had witnessed with great delight the capture of the Bastille, *that den of tyranny*, and he kept as a reminiscence of the deed two rusty keys which he bought at a fabulous price on the day of the popular victory. On the night of August 4, he had applauded from one of the galleries of the National Assembly the vote which stripped him of his titles and time-honoured privileges, and cut away his genealogical tree at the root. On the great day of the Champ de Mars, he attracted attention by his sky-blue coat, the bouquet affixed in his button-hole, and, before all, by his enthusiasm among the two hundred thousand citizens who were holding the festival of confederation. He had even preserved as a relic the spade with which he, a noble and educated man, had not hesitated, a few days prior to the festival, to break up the field and help in forming the mounds upon which the public was to be stationed. It is true that his sister, a pretty maiden of seventeen, had done the same, and wheeled a barrow, in honour of the country. He was also one of those who followed to the Pantheon the mortal, or immortal, remains of M. de Voltaire, for whom he professed a species of worship, and greatly preferred to the morose J. J. Rousseau. You must not believe, however, that my old friend was an optimist, or that he followed to its final consequences a movement of which he, like so many of his race, had not foreseen the result. Who does not know the fable of the German alchemist, who, having succeeded in producing from his crucible a live bronze man (the great dream of the hermetical science), began trembling before his creation, and was pursued his whole life through

* It is said that he contrived to have two of one colour by rubbing pipeclay on the black one.

by this gloomy figure, whose strength and supernatural powers subdued him? Such was the history of my friend the Marquis, who, despite the differences of our opinions, treated me with kindness. His live bronze man was the Revolution; with the Comte de Mirabeau, the Marquis de Lafayette, and so many others, he had contributed to the production of this human personification of philosophy, but he soon recoiled before his handiwork, and shuddered at the footsteps of the colossus which crushed the whole of ancient France beneath its iron heel. The day on which he began to perceive that the French Revolution was going too far, was the one on which Louis XVI. was guillotined. From that moment he became its adversary, but he refused to join the emigrating movement, which carried so many members of the aristocracy to the frontier. When asked why he had remained in France, he nobly replied, "I wished to live or die on the field of honour; and then again—shall I confess it to you?—in those difficult and tumultuous times when every day was an event, I remained chiefly through curiosity." This firmness of conduct was all but fatal to him: he was arrested just before the 9th Thermidor, and thrown into prison. "Even then," he said to me, "and when under lock and key, I did not for a moment repent my refusal to emigrate: the Revolution was to me a badly-disposed daughter: but when our children behave improperly, we pity them, and suffer from their conduct, but we do not abandon them."

The Marquis' memory was capricious, like that of many aged persons: he hardly remembered what he did yesterday: but if you spoke to him of his youth, of the men he had known at that time, and the anecdotes current in society at the end of the last century, his reminiscences at once acquired a marvellous lucidity. No one would have been better able than he to write the *Memoirs of the Revolution*, for he had been connected with the court and the people—with old and new France: he had lived both at Versailles and in the Faubourg St. Antoine—the two extreme stations of the political movement which extended from 1789 to 1793. But for all that, he had not written a single line about this great epoch, and he was wont to say to me on the subject: "I should have too much good and too much evil to say about the men I knew: besides, I prefer consulting my own memory during the long hours of leisure that old age, illness, and my infirmities leave me: when you are present I read my memory aloud, for I know that my unpublished and even unwritten *Memoirs* interest you. Two readers who frequently revert to the same page, and whom it does not weary, are a great deal: how many excellent books cannot flatter themselves with such a success!"

The Marquis's memory was a dictionary of his time, in which the names of men, places and events, were arranged in alphabetical order: but it was necessary to know how to open this dictionary. If I questioned him vaguely, the old gentleman merely replied with commonplaces, and told me absolutely nothing. One of the luminous points of his widely extending memory referred to the period the Marquis had spent in prison.

It may be supposed that the silence and obscurity of a dungeon engrave on some human brains impressions and recollections in an indelible manner. One day I asked him:

"During your stay in the prisons of the Republic, did you know André Chénier?"

"Wait a minute," he replied, rubbing his forehead with his hand. *Wait* was the word with which the old gentleman ever precluded his narratives, thus granting himself the time to find out the proper page and date in the volume of his memory.

"Yes," he continued, a few minutes later. "He was one of us. I can still see him in a corner of the long Hall, where we assembled during the day. It was a bare, gloomy room, with a table and a few chairs in the middle: it had two windows, but they were so narrow and short that the sun never penetrated them; all that it could do for us, with the best will in the world, was to throw out vigorously on the opposite wall the brutal shadows of our iron bars. It was in this clear obscure that the pensive and melancholy face of a young man of about my own age caught my attention. His features possessed something of the Grecian type, but they were firmer and more accentuated than those of antique statues. His forehead especially, tall and rounded, distinguished him from all the other prisoners. We had not in those days invented Gall's system; we had but a very imperfect notion of Lavater's; but every man is instinctively a physiognomist, and the very animals are never deceived as to certain mental faculties expressed by the form of the human countenance. Our comrade in captivity was plainly a man of lofty mind: and the serious and benevolent serenity of his face was only disturbed by the corners of his mouth, which displayed some traces of indignation. The greatest sympathy, and, I may almost venture to say, the greatest liberty prevailed at that time in the prisons, in which all classes of society were blended, but chiefly ex-nobles, artists and literary men. We became at once friends, for nothing levels and equalises social conditions so much as the speedy anticipation of death. None felt assured, until nightfall, that we should see the morrow's sun rise, and none were afraid of expressing their opinions; and though the shades were infinite, some being Royalists, others Girondins, others again, what we called at that time, 'Moderates,' the feeling of a common danger united us in a pious fraternity. I, therefore, walked up to the new arrival, and asked his name: he replied 'André Chénier.'

"This name was not unknown to me. I remembered his father, who had been consul-general of France at Constantinople, and who was sometimes mentioned in *salons* because he had been original enough to marry, in Turkey, a young Greek girl of great beauty and talent. This latter circumstance explained to me the resemblance, that had struck me at once between the young man's face and that which Grecian artists give their statues. I had, moreover, met more than once his brother, Joseph Chénier, in whom this imprint of Grecian beauty was far more striking. I had also heard it mentioned that our

new companion had written several very violent articles in the royalist journals of that period, though he had need to conceal his real sentiments under a conventional cloak. He was even said to have been associated with M. de Malesherbes in the perilous defence of Louis XVI. I was consequently not surprised to find him in our company; it would have been more surprising had he not been so. Like the majority of us, André Chénier had hailed the Revolution with delight; but like ourselves, too, he had refused to follow it in the terrible measures the Committee of Public Safety dictated. A species of intimacy, the fruit of a community of age, of misfortune, and perhaps of literary tastes, sprang up very rapidly between him, Boucher the poet, and myself. We were all three young, we longed to live, we awaited from day to day the execution of our sentence of death, and if I had not cultivated letters I was fond of them. André, on becoming my friend (for friendships are soon formed in a prison), told me the history of his life, which was not very long, or studded with many adventures. All his impressions and recollections were confined to that glorious eastern sky in which he had first seen light, to his mother, with whose milk he had sucked in, so to speak, a love of Grecian antiquity, and to a few military details; for at the age of twenty he had entered the D'Angoulême regiment as second-lieutenant. He soon gave up a military career, tried diplomacy, and ended by devoting himself to poetry, which was the dream, the mania, the idol of his life. His attempts were, however, but little known as yet, for people had something very different to do at that period from reading verse. Poetry, I should say the drama, was to be found in the streets; sanguinary, and in wild disorder, it rushed to the frontier, sounding a bronze trumpet that deafened the ear, or descended from heaven on to the scaffold to console the victims.

"The two recognised poets of the French revolution were Lebrun, then called Lebrun Pindar, and Joseph Chénier. As for his brother André, I had never heard him spoken of except as a man of education and talent, who judged the events of the day from our point of view. In prison, moreover, where the hours are long, and the leisure is crushing, he tried to kill time by reciting to us some of his verses, among others his 'Ode to Charlotte Corday.' It was one of his productions to which he attributed his arrest, and of which he felt proud as the soldier does of the thrust which must entail his own death. Our taste at that day was formed on different models—de Bernis, Florian, and the Abbé de Lille, who was just beginning to be known, and I must confess that, despite the interest I felt in the young poet, his verses appeared to me strange. You certainly inhaled a sharp and powerful perfume of Hymettus; there were even grace, elegance, colour, and harmony; but the leaps, the inversions, the alliances of unexpected words, and the unusual turn he gave to things, somewhat cooled our readiness to applaud and our praises. He perceived this, and said to us.

"I wished to form a new path for myself. Our French poetry has been crowded with wit, espe-

cially since Voltaire, Saint Lambert, and Boufflers, but is it not dry, hesitating, and timid? it abuses that descriptive style which describes nothing. Is not thought enchained in our inflexible Alexandrines, as a prisoner in his fetters? I have tried to break these chains by displacing the *cæsura*; in order to find poetry again at its source I have gone back to Hesiod, Theocritus, and Homer. I have drunk from these springs, or at any rate, dipped the hollow of my hand into these grand rivers of ideality, grace, and perennial beauty. I am a Gallo-Byzantine. I tried to regenerate poetry by making old verses on modern ideas; but time failed me. While I dreamed of Arcadia, I did not foresee the scaffold.

"Among the ladies who were shut up with us in the prison of St. Lazare, was the Duchesse de Fleury, daughter of the Duc de Coigny, who had separated from her husband, and resumed her paternal name. Young, beautiful, and already celebrated for her wit, she felt a horror of dying, and persons might fairly feel a horror at less. She told her feelings one day to André Chénier, who, affected by the complaints of the unfortunate woman, *who was unwilling to die yet*, wrote on the subject his delicious elegy of the 'Young Captive.' Was the heart of the poet touched by an even more lively feeling than that of pity and the sad tenderness expressed in his lines? That is a secret he bore with him to the grave. This Demoiselle de Coigny, by the way, did not share the poet's tragical fate; she lived to leave the prison, and proceed to Constantinople, where she died.

"After all, very incorrect notions are formed as to the interior of the prisons during the reign of terror. You young men are generally inclined to believe that they were filled with weeping and gnashing of teeth, in a word, you represent to yourselves Dante's Inferno, while, on the contrary, it was the paradise of wits. The levity of the French mind resisted even the stern lessons of the gloomy political events. Do you know in what manner we passed our time? In composing songs, epigrams and madrigals; we ridiculed in prose and verse the revolutionary tribunals, the gaolers, the hangman, Fouquier-Tinville himself; we would have laughed at the Demon. I will not assert that we enjoyed all the delicacies of life, very far from it; I will not even affirm that a pallid flash of melancholy and despair did not, from time to time, gleam through our contests of wit and frivolous conversation; but all did their best to mock the inevitable destiny. Perhaps we resembled children crossing a wood after nightfall, and singing to keep up their spirits; but you may form what opinion you please. In order to distract our thoughts, we hit on the plan of performing little farces relating to the events of the day, and even to our own position. In these dramatic follies we caricatured the judges who were probably about to send us to death, or had even already pronounced our sentence. André Chénier figured as actor, on the evening prior to his execution, in one of these grotesque farces, and was nearly the only one among us who retained his serious character. He represented most naturally a young poet dragged before the terrible tribunal, and led

thence to execution with a procession of hideous and burlesque faces. I need not say that in these sports great play was allowed to improvisation. All at once, with a gesture that made us start, and in a tone that deeply afflicted us, André Chénier smote his forehead with his hand, while exclaiming—

"And yet I had something there!"

"On the morrow this comedy changed for him into a sanguinary and too real tragedy. André Chénier was called by the gaoler at the moment when he was writing some lines on the event he awaited. We all knew what this summons meant, and we never heard anything more of those who set out thus on the great journey of eternity; but since then I have read in historical works that André Chénier, on mounting the scaffold, uttered the words I just now mentioned, 'And yet I had something there.' I believe that the writers are in error, and confounded two statements. A man does not speak before the axe, and silence in such a case is the dignity of the victim."

Such was the old Marquis's narrative, and we see from it that André Chénier was almost unknown as a poet. As I was anxious to clear up a doubt, I asked the Marquis.

"Was not Joseph Chénier accused of contributing to his brother's death, through an author's jealousy, or, at any rate, of not having done all in his power to save him?"

The old gentleman replied nobly.

"That is an infamous calumny. I did not admire Joseph's opinions, but his character was honourable. He had himself lost much of his influence at the moment when his brother was arrested, and inspired the authorities with suspicion owing to his connection at that day with writers who were gravely compromised. He was not the man to trample friendship under foot, much less nature, for the sake of a vile interest of self-love. What besides had he to fear from his brother as regarded reputation? He reigned on the stage, whither André would certainly not have followed him, and his warm and philosophic temperament was better adapted than his brother's talent to the impassioned impulses of the mob that made the Revolution. Moreover, I know that he made many efforts to save his brother, and even went so far as to risk his personal safety, but his appeals were not listened to."

The stroke of the knife that cut off André Chénier's head was followed by a silence that lasted nearly a quarter of a century. All the cold literature of the empire passed over his memory which seemed almost effaced. In vain did Chateaubriand quote, in the notes to his "Genius of Christianity," the "Young Captive" and another fragment of André Chénier's, as models of grace and delicacy; this homage paid by the famous author, to a young poet cut off in his flower, appeared more a regret than a literary judgment. In the meanwhile French poetry pined away day by day; under the empire it had exhausted all the forms of imitation on the models of the seventeenth century, and the old classic Alexandrines, coupled like a yoke of worn-out oxen, dragged over a sterile field the heavy plough of conventional metaphors and ideas. The Resto-

ration came: and at the moment when Béranger, Casimir Delavigne, Victor Hugo, and Lamartine were seeking in different ways and by different means to regenerate the poetic inspiration, a most unexpected combatant appeared in the arena, where so many ambitious youths were rushing to the fight.

"Whence comest thou?"

"From the tomb."

"Who consecrated thee a poet?"

"The scaffold."

"Thy name?"

"André Chénier."

It was really he, whose MSS. emerged one by one from the coffin in which the poet and his thoughts lay buried. The first of these MSS. was discovered and published by M. Delatouche, author of "Fragoletta." It was soon followed by several others, and the effect of such a posthumous publication was prodigious. From these exhumed pages an odour of balsam and antiquity was exhaled, as from the rolls of papyrus discovered in a sarcophagus and opened by skilful hands. The poets of the empire, Abbé Delille at their head, had translated the Greek and Latin poets; but there is a great difference between translating the ancients, and possessing a true taste for the beauties of the classics. André Chénier found once again the sources of Hippocrene: his verse, liberated from the servitude and monotony which the *caesura* had imposed on French poetry since the seventeenth century, had successfully reassumed that lightness and freedom which is noticeable in some of the lines written by old Marot. His idylls, poems, and epistles had a freshness of style unknown for a lengthened period; but what most charmed connoisseurs was his elegies, in which a modern thought, a true and personal feeling, and a gentle melancholy, springing from the times in which we live, were allied to the pagan grace of the ancients. In all this there was something more than a poet: it was for France the dawn of a new literature.

The authenticity of André Chénier's MSS. has never been seriously contested, and could not be so. I must quote on this head, however, Béranger's opinion—not that I for a moment believe it sustainable, but because coming from such a man it interests the world of letters. Owing to reasons doubtless resulting from his character and the nature of his genius—for I will not believe in a feeling of envy—Béranger did not share the general enthusiasm for the recovered poetry of André Chénier. He even went much further, for he actually doubted whether it were really written by the man to whom it was attributed. One day that I spoke with him on this subject, he said to me, "When Delatouche is dead, you may see a thing that will greatly surprise you." Delatouche has died since then, and I have seen nothing that surprised me: Béranger's meaning, however, was very clear: he supposed that the literary world was the dupe of a clever mystification, and that the proof of the fact would be found some day in the papers of the mystifier. I was acquainted with M. Delatouche: he was himself a poet and man of talent, but as he had the misfortune to publish his own verses after

those of André Chénier, it is only too easy to draw the distinction between them. Delatouche was, moreover, a misanthrope, the hermit of the Vallée aux Loups: he might be accused of being of a critical and bitter temperament, but he was incapable of a fraud. When he was laughingly asked whether he were not the author of André Chénier's poetry, he repulsed, for the sake of his own character, the honour which such a supposition might do to his talent. The original MSS., besides, have been inspected by more than one trustworthy expert. ALPHONSE ESQUIROS.